Nikki Craft: 'Everything I've Done Has Been to Raise Issues'

By Laurie Slothower, Sentinel Staff Writer

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WHAT CAN YOU say about a woman who:

— Wore a dressed heaped with five pounds of lunchmeat to make a statement about the Miss California Pageant?

— Crashed the stockholder's convention of Rockwell International in Dallas, Tex. — producers of the B-1 bomber — to give directors mangled dolls splattered with red paint?

— Founded an organization of women promoting use of firearms for self-defense? (One of the group's early posters read: "Men and women were created equal — and Smith and Wesson make damn sure they stay that way")

— Pealed off her blouse and started the Cross Your Heart Support Network to protest anti-topless laws for women on state beaches?

You may call her a fascist or hail her as a heroine, but don't tell Nikki Craft, Santa Cruz' most colorful activist, that one person can't make a difference.

"From the beginning I've focused on violence against women," says Craft, 32. "This isn't just fun and games. I want to live in a society where women are not afraid."

"A judge in San Jose called me a professional demonstrator," she adds, laughing. "I told him I'm not a professional 'til I get paid."

Craft, who also goes by the names Helen Highwater and Gale Warnings, figures she has been arrested 10 times for various acts of civil disobedience.

Charges have included littering, for throwing Kellogg's cornflakes from the back of a pick-up truck during the Miss California Pageant in Santa Cruz — she beat the rap with a First Amendment defense — to pouring blood across the entryway to the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts to protest the Miss Nude America contest, to which she pled no contest.

(Craft jokingly agreed to do this interview on the condition it not appear on the crime page.)

Professional or no, Craft's flair for the theatric coupled with a piquant sense of humor have made her one of the most well-known, though not necessarily well-liked, demonstrators in Santa Cruz.

Some see her as a modern-day Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Susan B. Anthony. Her tactics, such as destroying copies of Hustler magazine, make others compare her to Carrie Nation.

"I'm pretty shy, actually," offers Craft, whose voice reveals her Texas roots. "I do things on a personal level that I find pretty intimidating. But everything I've ever done has been to raise issues."

Several events in Craft's past helped forge her ideology. Her mother was a single-parent homemaker who once marched to protest a policy by a Dallas newspaper of listing employment opportunities under "Male" and "Female" headings.

When Craft was 15, she was raped at knifepoint by a man the police refused to press charges against because she was a runaway and because, according to the investigating officer, there was "some question" about her virginity.

As a coed (as women students were known then) at Eastfield Junior College in Mesquite, Tex., Craft applied for a job on the grounds crew. The supervisor told her they did not hire women for that job.

"He said that to the wrong person," Craft smiled. She got the job, although she was relegated to digging trenches away from the other workers.

At Dallas she formed WASP — Women Armed For Self-Protection — a group whose goal was supporting "immmediate and drastic retaliation" against rapists by women who were victims.

But her most famous action was the Kitty Genovese Women's Project, in which she and three friends posed and sociology students to cull statistics of the arrest records of indicted sex offenders in the Dallas area. The names of these some 1700 men were then printed in a 20-page newspaper. Craft also read the names of these men for 13 consectutive hours on a Dallas radio station.

Craft moved to Big Sur in 1977 and to Santa Cruz in 1978.

Craft was one of the persons who threw ribbon-wrapped pieces of steak on the stage of the live telecast of the Miss California Pageant in 1980, but she first came later that year when she symbolically destroyed a set of prints entitled "The Incredible Case of the Stack O' Wheat Murders" at the UCSC McHenry Library.

The 10 photos, part of a promotional collection by photographer Lester Krims, showed attractive, nude women supposedly murdered by someone who left a stack of whole-wheat pancakes next to their prone bodies. In some pictures the women were swirled with chocolate syrup which resembled blood.

The incident sparked an onslaught of debate about academic freedom. Craft felt the photos trivialized violence against women, but she later she replaced the prints, which remain in the special collections section of the library.

"The evil of censorship is that it quiets ideas, and nothing I have ever done has had the purpose of silencing," she explains.

About the same time came the Preying Mantis Brigade, a group dedicated to "illegal actions with a media focus."

Members of the group poured ink on the covers of Hustler magazine and lobbied store owners to remove the publication, which they feel glorifies sexual torture.

It is tactics such as these that have civil libertarians tearing out their hair even though they may laud her concerns.

Counters Craft: "People would rather talk about censorship and First Amendment rights than violence against women. They'd rather cluck their tongues and say 'what a pity' a when a woman is raped and murdered, rather than to ask what in this culture that makes that happen."

She points out that merchants do not have to pay for damaged magazines, and that the protest was her way of sending a statement to publisher Larry Flynt for making jokes about the Hillside Strangler and putting cover photographs of a woman shoved into a meatgrinder and coming out as hamburger.

As for charges she is a publicity hound, Craft maintains she has allowed herself to be put under the media magnifying glass solely to attract attention to the ideas and the causes she supports.

"I didn't have my name listed on any of the things I did in Dallas but it hardly got any coverage," she says. "With the Stack O' Wheats action I realized what could be accomplished if someone was willing to take responsibility."

Another reason she has chosen to do what she has is to keep from getting — well, bored.

Craft says she wanted to look at political activism "in a creative way, to keep my spirit alive."

From the airy confines of her Santa Cruz attic room Craft Craft shows this reporter her scrapbooks. "Here's a billboard I defaced as part of a school project," she says nonchalantly, pointing to a picture in Denton, Tex., of the 1975 Miss America.

That she even has scrapbooks is revealing. Crafts says she documents everything she does. "I do it to affect other people's thinking."

Index cards on one wall carry her favorite quotes: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of of moral crisis, maintain their neutrality," fron Dante's Inferno, and "My advice to the women of America is to raise more hell and less dahlias," from philosopher William White.

That Craft's demonstrations have a certain media slickness is largely due to Jed Riffe, a man with whom she was involved politically and romantically for five years in Dallas.

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Some of her friends find it hard to believe that Craft can have the strident feelings she does about male oppression and still be heterosexual.

"I just wish men were socialized differently. I want them to be more sensitive, to be more in touch with themselves, so they don't have to rape to build their egos..." Tears well up in her eyes as she speaks and are quickly brushed away.

On the other hand, she says quickly, "Some of my best friends are men, but as a group, I don't trust them further than I can throw them."

For now Craft says she wants to step out of the spotlight. "I have fairly good timing, and it's time for me to drop back. There's only so much that people are going to listen to."

Besides, says Craft, a ceramacist who sells her pottery from the back of a pickup truck, "I have to find a way to make an honest living."

Her other plans for the immediate future?

She smiles. "I'm practicing right now for the hula hoop competiton in the Myth California Pageant," she says, referring to the counter-pageant that has become almost as much of an annual event as the real one

"I'm tired of hula-hooping not being considered a serious art form."

Nikki Craft at her Santa Cruz pottery studio

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Original newspaper page reproduced above for archival reference.

Transcription note: This transcription was prepared from the reproduced newspaper page for archival, research, and accessibility purposes. Clear typographical and transcription errors have been corrected lightly without changing the substance. Bracketed editorial notes identify uncertain or apparently erroneous wording in the original.

— Wore a dress heaped with five pounds of lunchmeat to make a statement about the Miss California Pageant? Clarification: I did not wear a meat dress. This was one of the few inaccuracies in this extraordinary and creatively written article about my life and work.

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Photo caption: Nikki Craft at her Santa Cruz pottery studio — Dan Coyro/Sentinel

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